*Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 2001 (© 2001)*

# Contemporary Media Forum

*Online Clinical Case Study and Peer Supervision Groups*

In an earlier piece for this forum (April 1999, vol. 1, no. 2), I discussed the benefits of joining an Internet mailing list, which is a group of people who communicate with each other via e-mail in order to discuss some topic of mutual interest. Using services as yahoogroup.com, it's quite easy to set up and manage such a group. One very useful application of this technology for the psychotherapist is the ability to create an online clinical case study or peer supervision group, particularly if the lifestyles or geographic locations of the participants prevents them from meeting in-person, and if their clinical cases are very specialized or unique. Exactly how the group is set up and managed will depend on the preferences of the members and the purpose of the group. Many different formats may be quite effective. Here I will describe some basic issues to consider, as well as mention some specific strategies that have worked well for the Clinical Case Study Group of the International Society for Mental Health Online (http://ismho.org/ccsg/)—a group that I and Michael Fenichel created in 1999 and continue to facilitate.

First, let me mention the possible pitfalls. A problem with an e-mail group is its potentially amorphous membership and process. Without the visual cues of a face-to-face meeting, you're not sure who is present and listening. If the membership is open, you may not even be sure who and how many belong to the group at any given moment. Traditionally, in e-mail lists the implicit norm is that you can subscribe and unsubscribe whenever you want, participate or lurk as you wish, respond to others, ignore them, or digress. These ambiguities and this lack of structure sometimes result in a group that is fragmented, disorganized, and lacking in group spirit and identity—especially if it's a large, open membership list. Also, the partial anonymity due to missing face-to-face contact sometimes "disinhibits" people, resulting

Correspondence should be directed to John R. Suler, Ph.D., Rider University, Department of Psychology, 2083 Lawrenceville Road, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648.

in their saying inappropriate things or acting out. Obviously these are not the appropriate conditions for a peer supervision group.

To counteract these detrimental tendencies, it's a good idea to build in some explicit structure and expectations. To help maximize confidentiality, cohesion, and group identity of the ISMHO case study group, we limited the number of members to approximately 15 and kept the group closed during each round of case presentations (to fill vacancies, a group might consider reopening at specific points in its schedule). All members took turns presenting and leading a discussion of his or her case. This requirement insured that everyone would participate, thus overcoming the tendency for people to "disappear" as lurkers. Typically, on a Monday, the presenter sent the first message that summarized the case, followed by a two-week discussion period. These presentations were scheduled ahead of time. Because an e-mail group can become swamped with numerous messages—resulting in disorganization and an inability of some members to keep up—a predetermined schedule helped pace the group and keep it focused on a case. However, members were also encouraged to bring up in separate discussion threads any issues about "hot cases" that required timely attention. At the beginning of the group—and periodically as a reminder—a message from the facilitator listed the guidelines which were intended to cultivate focused discussions, personal commitment to the group, and a supportive, cohesive atmosphere:

- Lurking is not OK on this list. Please give feedback to each presenter.
- If you are short on time during a particular case presentation, read the initial message presented for the case and respond to that. Don't worry about possibly repeating feedback that someone else might have offered in a message you didn't get a chance to read.
- Avoid long, scrolling messages. Be concise. It will be harder on you to construct a precise, to-the-point message, but the net result for everyone will be a more focused, less overwhelming batch of messages.
- Avoid long quotes of previous messages. Quote the specific sections you are responding to.
- Let us know when you will be away from your computer for extended periods of time.
- Be HELPFUL to the presenter, not critical. We will expect respectful, professional behavior on this list. Persistent disrespectful behavior will result in your being removed from the group.

An extremely important issue is confidentiality. Even under the best of circumstances, e-mail communication is not a completely private environment. Accidentally or intentionally, outsiders could gain access to the group's messages. The group members must take specific precautions to protect the anonymity of their clients. At the beginning of each round of case

presentations, the ISMHO Case Study Group discussed the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association regarding the use of confidential information for didactic purposes. There are two basic principles that apply to presentations in an online peer supervision group:

1. Do not disclose confidential, personally identifiable information regarding patients, individuals or organizations obtained during the course of one's work, unless the person or organization has consented in writing or unless there is other ethical or legal authorization for doing so.
2. In professional presentations, disguise confidential information concerning patients, individuals, or organizations so that they are not identifiable to others and so that discussions do not cause harm to people who might identify themselves.

At the end of its discussion of ethical principles, the ISMHO group created its own list of queries that encourages its members to consider these general ethical issues, as well as issues that are unique to an online peer supervision group and that are unique in this age of the Internet. Although all of these queries may not be relevant to every case, they are always important to consider:

1. Are you protecting the confidentiality of the person or group by disguising and/or deleting information that could directly or indirectly reveal the person's offline or online identity, or the group's identity and location?
2. Does anyone on this list have direct or indirect contact with the person/s you will discuss, and could this jeopardize the person's confidentiality or in anyway harm those person/s?
3. Has the person or group given permission for their case to be discussed?
4. What precautions have you taken to safeguard the security of messages from our case discussion (i.e., how have you restricted access to your computer and these e-mail messages)?
5. Are you requesting explicit permission from the appropriate individual and/or the whole group to use quotes or specific material for your presentation?
6. During your discussions with people outside of this list (professional or otherwise), how will you protect the confidentiality of the list and the cases presented here?

For those who are new to e-mail groups, the process will seem unfamiliar and perhaps confusing. Group e-mail discussions are quite different than in-person discussions. With more experience, members will adapt to

this unique environment and come to see the e-mail group as a rather fascinating experience, with many subtle and complex features that are not immediately obvious at the start—features that will shape how the cases are presented and perceived. For this reason, it's a good idea to encourage the members to discuss the process of the group itself. In the ISMHO Case Study Group, we created a "format and process thread" devoted specifically to a wide variety of meta-discussions, including software and hardware problems, the experience of e-mail communication, observations about the group process, countertransference reactions, and suggestions for improving the group. Running parallel to the case presentations, this format and process thread can uncover important insights into the group process and the cases presented.

One of the biggest advantages of the e-mail group is the ability to create an archive of the messages, thereby preserving a perfect record of the discussions. Paying special attention to the subject titles of messages will help keep the archive organized. For example, each presenter can create a pithy, descriptive title as the e-mail subject line and title for his or her case. When providing feedback on a case, members should be encouraged to use the "reply" button so that all messages will contain the same subject title.

Going back to reread messages helps refresh one's memory. It also helps detect countertransference errors in reading and memory, as well as yields important insights into the group process. In fact, simply scrolling down the list of messages in one's archive—or sorting the archive according to subject title, date, author, and even file size (features offered by many e-mail programs)—can be an enlightening experience. How many messages were there per case? How many times did each person post to the list? How did the flow of subject titles change over time? Interesting patterns do emerge that shed light on the cases and the group process. As psychoanalytic clinicians are fond of saying, "it's all grist for the mill."

John R. Suler, Ph.D.
*Rider University*
*Department of Psychology*